



Configurations of Expertise: Sardar Sager in Tehran’s Film Studios

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Figure 1: Poster for *Tomorrow is Bright* (Fardā Rūshan Ast), directed by Sardar Sager, 1960.

Sardar Sager’s filmmaking career in Iran is the best kind of anomaly. He was the most prominent film professional to move from India during Iran’s early studio period, and yet he hovers in the background of many better researched filmmakers working in Iran in the 1950s-70s. His work was intertwined with the emergent Tehran film studios and musical stars from this period, but as an immigrant with experience in Bombay cinema he does not fit conveniently within national frameworks of preservation and canonization. At some moments, critics have

expressed optimism for Sager's pioneering work in Iranian cinema, and during others they have treated the same films with suspicion. Each of these incongruencies of his work and its reception presents opportunities for researchers interested in the history of West- and South-Asia film circuits. A filmmaker who has been difficult to place can help to challenge habits of categorization in Iranian cinema history.

Sager's career arc was a transnational one during a time when film audiences and critics did not know what to make of such exchanges across borders. It predates, by decades, the more familiar periods of art-film coproduction and accelerated global distribution that have helped to make Iranian cinema famous around the world. The early growth of organized studio filmmaking in Iran after the Second World War is a period before formalized film training became commonplace, and as such, expertise was conceptualized in ways that differ markedly from later generations of filmmakers. Following Sager's career offers a means of exploring regional configurations of expertise during a time when the film industry, and its associated trade press, were grappling with the task of defining what constituted expertise, professional competence, and an organized workplace. This was a period when the profession, its people and its institutions, needed to be defined, defended, and financially supported.

What stands out in this environment is the way elements of Sager's career were employed by the Iranian film press as a symptom. Sager stood in for a phenomenon of an industry that was seeking to position itself in relation to several regional production centers during what we might call an era of transnational golden ages. Like films in other golden-age cinemas, Sager's work centered on film-song, folkloric performance traditions, regional comedy, and the interactions between rural and urban life. These elements, combined with his use of regional accents and broad humor, resulted in films that packed cinemas and provoked strong reactions. He was either a pioneering expert

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or a corrupting force depending on the critic and the year. It is this elastic critical reception of his expertise that I want to address directly. Rather than repeating a narrative of obscurity and rediscovery centered on an individual creator, Sager's career can offer insights into vacillating conceptions of expertise via Bombay in the transnational golden ages of midcentury cinema.

National cinema, golden ages, and transregional networks

One might wonder if it is wise, or if it even makes sense, to speak of global or transnational golden ages. Cinema's golden ages tend to be cut to fit the frame of the nation. The term and its variants, as they have been used around the world, delimit classic cinema formations of even relatively small studio systems. Sometimes more fantasy than reality, the term denotes a time of profitable calm between the uncertainties of experimentation and crisis in an industry. This calm arises after the first flush of organized studio production, at the point when production norms, star systems, professional specialization, and stylistic conventions stabilize. When labor roles coalesce, when crises in the industry remain at a relative minimum, production can hit its stride. Fans and critics have been eager to define these ages as "golden" partly to delimit a period of good business, but mainly as a way to suffuse this box office reliability with nostalgia for a national commercial culture that often hinges on mass-market versions of folkloric traditions. As a result, more often than other periods, these periods tended to have been assessed by their film critics with weighty judgement as to their social or aesthetic value. They have been discussed either affirmatively in terms of local development or negatively in terms of derivation from a global dominant cinema (i.e. not national cinema). To speak of global golden ages or a transregional golden age, in this frame, can strike a dissonant chord.

One way to deemphasize that nostalgia is to look outside of periods of classical stability. The field of cinema and media studies continues to be energized by studies of transnational



cinemas, many of which, for good reason, sidestep classical periods. Consider a few examples. In the study of twenty-first century transnational film co-productions, an environment of “posts” rather than of classicism, the analysis of cross-border connections is a matter of course. Given today’s dependence on foreign box office and the myriad sources of funding required to get projects off the ground, it is difficult to write about contemporary cinema without discussing the transnational dimension. Spend time in a film festival reception area and be ready to hear someone comment about the tangle of institutional logos seen in the credits of most of the festival films. Scholarship on these twenty-first-century films cannot help but account for the multi-sited origins of these logos. For scholars of the mid-twentieth century, sustained attention to cross-border formations can be found in the work of those who study runaway productions or regional coordinates of the long 1960s.¹ It is no stranger to the study of cinematic new waves either, especially after recent theorizations of global art cinema have updated the foundational cinema studies texts on art cinemas.² Early or emergent cinema histories likewise have considered regional flows of workers, films, and intellectual hustle in periods before certain kinds of studio infrastructure.³ A common thread among many of these efforts is the effort to expand away from, and a rightful suspicion of, periods to which the national narratives of cinema history have tended to gravitate.

What to do, then, with filmmakers, such as Sager, who made films in conversation with this midcentury flourishing of golden ages while also being anomalous in the industry? My own interest in global golden ages comes out of this question. When film historians speak of cinematic golden ages, especially when discussing small industries, we frequently precede the term with a qualifier: “the so-called golden age of . . .” Such a qualification does not discard the term, but it treats golden nostalgia as a historical artifact alongside its historical crosscurrents. In other words, as a way to avoid the saccharine harmony of imagined history, like a major chord (think the contemporary sonic brand-

¹On runaway productions see Daniel Gomez Steinhart, *Runaway Hollywood: Internationalizing Postwar Production and Location Shooting* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019). On configurations of world cinema in the long 1960s see Samhita Sunya, *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema Via Bombay* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).

²See James Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark Betz, *Beyond the Subtitle: Remapping European Art Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); and Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, eds., *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³On transnational cross-media performers in early cinema see Victoria Duckett, *Transnational Trailblazers of Early Cinema: Sarah Bernhardt, Gabrielle Réjane, Mistinguett* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023). On the talkies as emergent see Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

ing accompanying the HBO logo in its bid to evoke the golden age of cable TV programming), one might consider some of the discordant and odd resonances of the term: the work of the fantasies of a film industry to come, or retrospective lamentation about an industry lost to a financial crisis or to a revolution.



Figure 2: Figures of Sardar Sager and Nusratallāh Vahdat

One could also take some time to appreciate how the term was historically deployed in the local trade press. Iran did not really have a typical golden age of popular cinema, but its film industry in the early 1960s was in conversation with many industries that did. The idea of a golden age, from critics' musings to wishful company names like 'Asr-i Talāyī-i Film (Golden Age Film Studio), did circulate at this time in all of its fascinating atypicality. Addressing some of these fantasies can open onto the transregional and multiethnic dimensions of small studio formation. In this way, transnational discussions of golden age cinemas, even presented as unrealistic dreams, form part of the history of the industry itself.

The history of the way Sager's films have been constructed in the press is in part a history of defining what creative labor counts golden expertise and what counts as mess. Or, as Claire Cooley describes in her assessment of the soundscape of Iranian

cinema, what gets constructed as worthy of attention and what gets constructed as mere noise. The press and the films themselves, Cooley argues, often constructed elements of cinema from the subcontinent as noise: the noise of accents satirized in films, celebrity noise around Hindi film stars, and musical traditions from Hindi film-song.⁴ Sager's films' elastic expansions and contractions in popularity and critical reception in Iran make better sense when considered alongside these efforts to define mess or noise in the early years of organized institutions of film making and film publishing.

The way we approach this critical history ultimately makes a difference for our ability to access quality preservations of films from this period. Genre films and filmmakers that do not align with narratives of a national industry's high achievements struggle to find spots among preservation priorities, and in the world of film preservation it is difficult enough to secure the funding to preserve and program just the top priorities. For these reasons this essay on Sager written for *Cinema Iranica*, which has already made important strides in providing digital access to rare films including Sager's, is also a call to continue to support the archival preservation of films at risk of exclusion.

Early enthusiasm in the trade press and Murād

The discussion of Sardar Sager in the press traces the uneven and fluctuating attitudes toward commercial film production in Iran. Full-text searchable articles from Iranian film magazines and newspapers, made accessible through ongoing partnerships including those with the Media History Digital Library, reveal some patterns in the publicity surrounding Sager's work and career.⁵ These sources indicate an initial burst of media attention during the early years of his career, followed by a period of relative silence with a few notable negative reactions to his work, despite his continued activity as a filmmaker until his death in 1973. After this point, which coincided with the emergence of the Tehran International Film Festival, the mood in the press

⁴Claire Cooley, "Soundscape of a National Film Industry: Filmfarsi and its Sonic Connections with Egyptian and Indian Cinemas: 1930s-1960s," *Film History: An International Journal* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 43-74.

⁵See the ACLS-funded digitization project, *Globalizing and Enhancing the Media History Digital Library*, by Eric Hoyt and Kelley Conway including the edited volume to emerge from these efforts. Eric Hoyt and Kelley Conway, eds. *Global Movie Magazine Networks* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2025).

⁶“Istūdiyu-yi Diyānā Fīlm: Mujahzatarīn istūdiyu-yī kih hanūz yak fīlm-i khūb natavānastah ast tahīyyah kunad (Studio Diana Film: The Best-equipped Studio Has Yet to Produce a Good Film),” *Sitārah-yi Sīnimā* 3 (26 Bahman, 1332/February 15, 1954): 20-21.

⁷I am grateful to the exacting work of Samhita Sunya, Rutuja Deshmukh, and Farzaneh Ebrahimzadeh Holasu for this identification.

⁸Hamīd Shu’ā’ī, *Farhang-i Sīnimā-yi Irān*, (Tehran: Shirkat-i Ta’āvunī-i Tahīyyah va Tawzī’-i Nashirān va Kitāb-furūshān, 1354/1975), 329.

⁹For a discussion of the gendered challenges faced by women who migrated between Iran and India to work in early feature productions, see Farzaneh Milani “Through Her Eyes: An Interview with Fakhri Fay Vaziri,” *Film History* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 170-183.

shifted from critical silence to posthumous reverence, with recuperative narratives emerging in prestigious publications and film festival reports.

Despite regularly featuring his émigré status, the press in Iran gave scant attention to who Sager was before migrating to Iran from India. While there is little material on his background before he began to make films in Iran, some articles offer some clues. In portraits in Iranian magazines, he always appeared in a turban, which suggests that he was Punjabi and possibly Sikh. One article lists his previous credits in India as *Vazīfah/Duty and Khānah-yi Āshiq/House of the Beloved*.⁶ The best match for this information among film workers in Bombay during the 1940s is an obscure music director named K.S. Sagar, who is credited with the music for two films that appear to match, *Farz/Duty* (1947) and *Sajan ka Ghar/House of the Beloved* (1948).⁷ ‘Abbās Bahārīlū indicates that he moved to Iran in 1948 and sold automobile parts for several years before returning return to his filmmaking career.⁸ This gap in filmmaking between *Sajan ka Ghar* and his work with Studio Diana Film in mid-1950s Tehran suggest that his move, shortly after partition, may not have been motivated by an immediate opportunity for film work in Iran. Nevertheless, he was able to successfully self-promote (a gendered privilege among film workers who moved between India and Iran in the early years of feature filmmaking) and leverage his experience into opportunities to direct his own films.⁹ His status was solidified by the late 1950s as a popular director and a star-maker. He became a leading director at Studio Caravan Film and co-founder of Studio Kūh-i Nūr Fīlm. This status permeated the trade press to the degree that it could be reflexively adopted by critics and even by Sager himself in his films.





¹⁰“Istüdiyu-yi Diyānā Film: Mujahhaztarin istüdiyu-ī kih hanūz yak film-i khūb natavānastah ast tahīyyah kunad (Studio Diana Film: The Best-equipped Studio Has Yet to Produce a Good Film),” *Sitārah-yi Sīnimā* 3 (26 Bahman, 1332/February 15, 1954): 20-21.

Figure 3: A magazine spread featuring an image and introduction of Sardar Sager.

An initial wave of optimism accompanied Sager’s career in the cluster of articles from the early years, particularly surrounding his debut film *Murād* and the subsequent successes that marked his collaboration with emerging film companies. One such article, featured in the third issue of *Setare-ye Cinema*, covered the opening of the Diana Film Studio. It offered a prescient overview of filmmakers who would become key figures involved in the early Iranian film industry.¹⁰ The report discussed the debut films of *Sāmū’īl Khāchīkiyān*, *Hūshang Kāvūsī*, and *Sardar Sager*, each framed within a professional context that emphasizes the ethnic diversity and transnational education of the studio’s first recruits. *Khāchīkiyān*’s background in Armenian-Iranian theater, *Kāvūsī*’s education in France, and *Sager*’s experience in Bombay’s film industry were all highlighted, with *Sager* receiving the most extensive discussion. His recent immigration to Iran and his contract with Diana Film to direct *Murād* were key points, and the article noted that *Murād* was selected as a prime *Nawrūz* holiday premiere, underscoring its potential to draw a crowd.



Figure 4: Poster for the film *Murād*, directed by Sardar Sager, 1954.

Murād established Sager’s reputation in Iran. With this first feature, Sager made use of those hallmarks of nineteenth-century social melodrama that had become staples in popular cinemas in Bombay and around the world. The film follows a tragedy of rural lovers’ miscommunication: a young woman moves on without her beloved because she mistakenly believes him to be dead, she is unaware that her young beloved poet has reinvented his fortune after being forced into a new life in the city, a rakish villain exploits this misinformation to tragic end. The musical numbers in *Murād* speak to the skill of a director who had previously worked as a music director in Bombay, but they incorporate a variety of film music styles. The film nods to popular music from Tehran and Bombay but also to forms, such as the global phenomenon of the Argentine tango, which tapped into wider networks of music circulation. Visually, the film makes dynamic use of canted angles, swinging camera movements, and stylized dissolves. Its style is exuberant, even playful, which suggests a degree of risk tolerance at the fledgling studio.



Sunshine days for the professionally made social melodrama

The successful experiment with Murād led to a deal with Studio Caravan Film and, eventually, to Sager’s own company, Kūh-i Nūr Fīlm. From this period of increasing success, three of Sager’s films generated the main share of the press. Articles about these productions and the organizations that created them, positioned them as the vanguard of a new cinematic movement. These articles often framed Sager’s and his collaborators’ films as emblematic of specific genre conventions: song-heavy social melodramas, comedic disguise plots, and dramatic reversals of fortune often hinging on migration between rural and urban spaces.

The coverage of this period before 1960 was infused with a playful gossip and sense of aspiration. Three patterns in the topics of discussion are particularly worthy of note here: studio organization, stardom, and style. The Caravan and Kūh-i Nūr studios were portrayed as effective engines of creative production. When a correspondent for *Sitārah-yi Sīnimāmagazine* toured Caravan Film studio for one of the publication’s regular features on studio visits, he commented to studio head, ‘Azīz Rafī’ī, about the lack of ostentatious signage and “this calm and silent environment (other than the sound of boiling water in the samovar)” as he ascended the stairs to Caravan’s workspace. To which Rafī’ī suggested that the studio need not be noisy as “people will know us by our work.”¹¹ The message in the public relations outreach of the studio and the director was clear. In contrast to the noise of incompetent film companies, their quiet confidence should assure fans and critics that they knew what they were doing in the field of professional commercial entertainment.

¹¹“Khurshīd Mīdirakshad: Mājarā-hā-yi Khandah’āvar (va āh-i ānān girīyah’āvar) -i yak dihātī kih vārid-i Tihān mīshavad va bā havādis-i mutanavvī va jalībī rūbirū mīgardad .../ The Sun is Shining: Tales that will Make You Laugh (and May Also Make You Cry), A Villager Comes to Tehran and Has a Variety of Interesting Adventures,” *Sitārah-yi Sīnimā* 64 (30 Urdūbihisht, 1335/May 20, 1956): 11-12.

¹²For a discussion of Vahdat and Shahīn's performances and star power as competitive with Egyptian, Turkish and Indian productions, see the review of "Khurshīd Mīdirakhshad/The Sun is Shining," *Sitārah-yi Sīnimā* 70 (10 Tīr, 1335/July 1, 1956): 16-17.

¹³For a discussion of Sager's rapid camera, canted angles and staging of actors see the review of "Khurshīd Mīdirakhshad/The Sun is Shining," *Sitārah-yi Sīnimā* 70 (10 Tīr, 1335/July 1, 1956): 17.



Figure 5: Nusratallāh Vahdat in a scene from the film *The Sun Shines* (Khurshīd Mīdirakhshad), directed by Sardar Sager, 1956.

The coverage at this time highlighted the ways these companies could boost the careers of singers including Vīgin, Mahvash, and Dilkash, and they noted the establishment of the career of the fast-talking Nusratallāh Vahdat, one of the Sager's favorite actors who was on his way to becoming a household name.¹² The teaser-trailers for the films, a relatively new form of advertising for local productions, helped to bolster this star system with a heavy emphasis on the radio stars that fans could see singing in Sager's films. Finally, the articles addressed common themes and stylistic elements in the films. They highlighted his incorporation of Iranian folkloric elements and his play with regional dialects (helped by Vahdat's Isfahānī accent) and manners. Sager's style stood out for its dynamism, which was already evident in *Murād*: the loose movements of the camera, canted and otherwise exaggerated camera angles, and effective staging of actors in multiple planes.¹³ These elements of his late 1950s cycle of films were discussed as evidence of vitality and offered a counterbalance to some of the familiar criticisms of filmfārsī. Sager's films fold social critique into their comedic tracks, their songs, and even in didactic messages delivered during cameo performances. In *Khurshīd Mīdirakhshad/The Sun is Shining* (1956), a dual-role comedy of mistaken identity,

Vahdat plays twins separated at birth, one rich and one poor. In the mix-up, the child of privilege winds up in an asylum where he encounters a group of artists and intellectuals who lecture and recite extended monologues and poems about social injustice to him. In *Rawzanah-yi Umīd/ Glimmer of Hope* (1958) Vahdat's character Muhsin loses his winning lottery ticket on his way to the city and is forced to hustle as a laborer and seller of songbooks. This role is not unlike the characters played by Dev Anand in Hindi social melodramas the late 1950s about work in the informal economy. In *Fardā Rushan Ast/Tomorrow is Bright* (1960) Vīdā Ghahramānī took advantage of another dual role to branch out from the innocent types that established her career in films with Sāmū'īl Khāchīkiyān. Her character uses a nightclub-savvy disguise to attract and reconnect with her naïve beloved. The explicit social messages in these films are perhaps most evident in this early period, but these messages did continue into his late career. Consider the factory song in *Gurbah-yi Kūr/The Blind Cat* (1970). The film starts out poolside at the Tehran Hilton, but its plot elements include labor unrest in a factory and a song that combines spiritual themes with a presentation of factory work that resembles Soviet films.



Figure 6 (left): Poster for the film *Rawzanah-yi Umīd* (*Glimmer of Hope*), directed by Sardar Sager, 1958.

Figure 7 (right): Poster for the film *Fardā Rushan Ast* (*Tomorrow is Bright*), directed by Sardar Sager, 1960.

¹⁴ Anupama Prabhala, "Melodrama as Method," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 54, no. 2 (Fall, 2013): 146-151.



Figure 8: Poster for the film *Gurbah-yi Kür* (Blind Cat), directed by Sardar Sager, 1970.

The evocation of the sacred in these melodramatic structures suggest another linkage to regional influences from India and Egypt. The films engage with global traditions of social melodrama to be sure, but regional iterations of the melodramatic mode were also establishing their own patterns. As Anupama Prabhala argues in relation to the social melodramas of Indian silent cinema, these films waver from the Europe-centered conception of the origins of melodrama, traced famously by Peter Brooks, as rooted in the collapse of traditional hierarchies of the sacred.¹⁴ Instead of hinging on a distinction between classical and modern, as melodrama does for Brooks, Sager's films walk in close step with those of Iran's regional neighbors, where tensions around contemporary social divisions, adaptations to urban life, and confrontation with modern institutions were often interlaced with forms of re-sanctification. This characteristic described by Prabhala helps to make sense of Sager's melodrama's institutional interludes, their doubled characters, their centrality of village elders, or their song-and-dance composition that somehow seems both Soviet and devotional at the same time.

In addition to their similarities in production, plot, music, and visual style, the films under consideration exhibit significant intertextual linkages. These connections are sometimes manifest in playful, self-referential moments that engage with cinematic history and stardom. A particularly noteworthy instance of this occurs in *Rawzanah-yi Umīd*, where Muhsin (played by Vahdat) enters his boarding house room and momentarily pauses to observe the movie pin-ups adorning the wall. Among these images is a poster for *Khurshīd Mīdirakhshad/The Sun is Shining*, directed by Sager two years before *Rawzanah-yi Umīd*. While this reference may not constitute a widely recognized gag, its origins can be traced back to silent-era comedies, such as Buster Keaton's iconic moment in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), where Keaton's character, while sweeping the floor of a movie theater, examines a *Scaramouche* (1923) poster. In both instances, the reference functions not only as an allusion to a specific filmmaker's work or to past genre films but also as a playful commentary on the actor's own celebrity persona.



Figure 9: A moment in *Rawzanah-yi Umīd*, where Muhsin (portrayed by Vahdat) pauses upon entering his boarding house room to observe the movie pin-ups on the wall.

In the case of Vahdat's character, the poster he observes features an image of Vahdat himself in another role. The character's reaction—a double-take followed by a confused inspection of the

poster—sets up the following gag in which he inadvertently sits on one of his new roommates who is sleeping beneath the poster. This moment serves as a brief comment on Vahdat's own stardom, blurring the line between the diegetic world of the film and the real-world identity of the actor. Such moments of self-reflection and playful engagement with the idea of celebrity are particularly effective within a film industry where comedic characters, Mansūr Sipihriyā for example (usually dubbed, in another layer of referentiality, by the Iranian voice of Jerry Lewis), frequently appear in multiple films in cameo roles. This type of cross-film reference is of course not exclusive to Iranian cinema; it was a common trope in productions around the world with comedic tracks. Such tracks proliferate in the the porous diegetic worlds of genre film production long before the cinematic “universes” created by the consolidation and exploitation global intellectual property. The playful blending of actor and character across films in these earlier cases becomes a driver for audience recognition of emergent actors and directors.

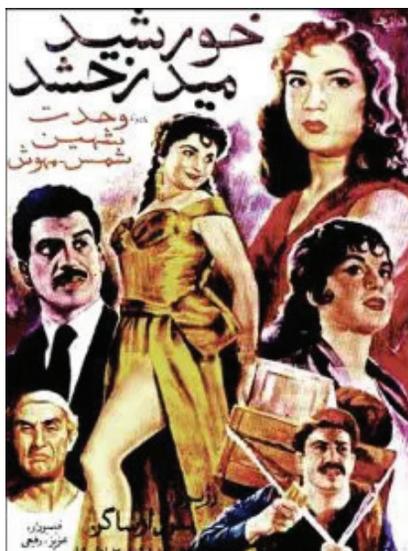


Figure 10: Poster for the film *Khurshid Midirakhsad* (*The Sun is Shining*), directed by Sardar Sager, 1956.

Ambivalence, skepticism, and silence in the press

Despite the sunshine days of Sager's popular productions, some of the intellectual critique of these films took a decidedly negative turn. For a stretch in the 1960s, it is a challenge to find these films discussed at all by serious critics. Digitization of the history of film criticism in Iran is ongoing, but on the Media History Digital Library platform Sager's name currently gets more than a dozen hits in publications before 1960, almost that many after his death in 1973, and almost none in the intervening decade. Some critics became comfortable disparaging the very qualities that had originally marked Sager's work as a quietly confident professional. We can see a seed of this negative reception in Hūshang Kāvūsī's 1958 negative review in *Firdawsī*, not of one of Sager's films, but Farrukh Ghaffārī's *South of the City* (*Junūb-i Shahr*). The sarcastic title of this takedown is "A Thousand Blessings to Sardar Sager."¹⁵ In this review, Sager stands in as the posterchild for the type of film Kāvūsī worked to negatively define and target: *filmfārsī*.

The sarcastic comparison between the two filmmakers signaled the growing divide in which the institutions of locally produced commercial cinema and the institutions of film criticism were drawn into an antagonistic pattern. But these tensions were not just about aesthetic distinction. More than a simple instance of intellectual culture confronting vulgar popular cinema, there was a dynamic interplay between these two domains. Critics and filmmakers (many of whom occupied both roles) were almost expected to participate in a contentious process of making value-laden distinctions between different types of cinema. This ongoing discourse shaped the construction of a national professional golden age, with industry trends circulating within the press serving as a key point of reference. There was an irony in the criticisms leveled by Kāvūsī who had adapted his own film, *17 Days to Execution* (*Hifdah rūz bih i' dām*) from *Phantom Lady*, a popular novel by Cornell Woolrich (1942) and film by Robert Siodmak (1944). Featuring cabaret numbers and follow-

¹⁵Hūshang Kāvūsī, "Junūb-i Shahr: Hizār Rahmat bih Sardār Sāgīr/South of the City: A Thousand Blessings to Sardar Sager," *Firdawsī* (4 Āzar 1337/ November 25, 1958): 43. Thanks to Farzaneh Ebrahimzadeh Holasu for sharing this article with me.

ing the model of American film noir, Kāvūsī's work engaged with some of the very genre formulas he dismissed in Sager's films. These parallels underscore the complex interconnections between local and international film influences and the fluid definitions of cinematic expertise during this formative period in Iranian cinema.



Figure 11: Poster of the film *Junūb-i Shahr* (South of the City), directed by Farrukh Ghaffārī, 1958.

The cabaret dance sequence that received such targeted criticism, as a local symptom of what ailed the commercial cinema in Iran, was in fact part of a network of regional iterations. What's more, the similarities in the iterations of cabaret-scenes did not find their primary coordinates in Hollywood. Ghaffārī's *South of the City* itself was inspired by an alternative golden-age circuit: a Mexican cabaret and underworld melodrama, *Victimas del Pecado/Victims of Sin*. This cabaretera had been popular in France while Kāvūsī and Ghaffārī were living in Paris as *Quartier Interdit*, a title closer than the original Spanish title to Ghaffārī's neighborhood-focused title. The rumba performances by the film's lead, the Cuban-Mexican star Ninón Sevilla, were famous across Latin America and were taken

seriously by critics in France including François Truffaut in *Cahiers du Cinema*.¹⁶ As Joanne Hershfield has argued, rumba performers like Sevilla countered some of the conservative nationalist norms of other golden-age Mexican melodrama heroines. Some dance-hall performances seem to fit better into a history of global golden ages than others.¹⁷ The cinema of social melodrama and the crime thriller, themselves rapidly circulating forms, created additional space for these transformations in the recording industry to find new audiences. Even as some industries and critics pushed to define national cinema against the noise of film traffic, cabaret performances and the underworld social melodramas that centered them proved adaptable for repackaging. They traveled well across national golden ages. The unpredictable ways in which these traditions were received by critics and remade by filmmakers suggest how elastic their aesthetic register could be in their transnational lives.



Figure 12: A still from the film *Junüb-i Shahr* (*South of the City*), directed by Farrukh Ghaffāri, 1958.

¹⁶Nicknamed “The Golden Venus,” Sevilla gained international popularity. In 1954, the young François Truffaut wrote in *Cahiers du Cinema* (under the pseudonym Robert Lachenay): “From now on we must take note of Ninón Sevilla, no matter how little we may be concerned with feminine gestures on the screen or elsewhere. From her inflamed look to her fiery mouth, everything is heightened in Ninón (her forehead, her lashes, her noses, her upper lip, her throat, her voice).” See Robert Lachenay, “Notes sur d’autres films,” *Cahiers du Cinema* 32 (February, 1954).

¹⁷For a discussion of dance hall as part of a global history of rapid circulation of dance hall LP’s recorded in port cities around the world, see Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution* (London: Verso, 2015).

¹⁸“Sardar Sager, “Kārgardān-i Hindī kih Irān rā dūst dāsht, dar-guzasht,” *Film va Hunar* 387 (25, Khurdād 1351/June 15, 1972): 5.

Elastic expertise at the conclusion of a career

The wide swings in the press’s treatment of Sager’s work from the 1950s through the early 1970s present an active site to examine the history of expertise, not as an innate attribute of an arts worker, but as a public construction. Here is a filmmaker who went from selling car parts to running his own studio and directing some of the top-grossing Iranian features of his time. His remarkable self-fashioning traces a process of interaction with the uncertain and volatile institutions of expertise that were themselves emerging. Sager’s expertise was constructed by the workplace bureaucracy of new film studios and by the editorial policies of new film magazines, even as he and his colleagues helped in turn to shape those institutions.

When Sager passed away in 1972, the magazine *Film va Hunar*/Film and Art published an obituary titled “Sardar Sager, The Indian Filmmaker who Loved Iran, has Died.”¹⁸ This return to an odd kind of national nostalgia marked end to journalism about his work in the active memory of filmgoers in Iran. It communicated respect while retaining some of the ambivalence found in the various forms of enthusiasm and skepticism that accompanied this filmmaker who had lived in Iran for most of his adult life. It offers a coda to the story of the public construction of Sager’s expertise, and serves as a reminder that this is partly a story of the kinds of lessons that filmmakers and film intellectuals believed Bombay cinema should or should not teach. The critical archive around his films offers a record of the labor to parse this relationship to an eminent neighboring film industry.





Figure 13: Obituary titled “Sardar Sager, the Indian Filmmaker Who Loved Iran, has Died.”

To return to the point of Cooley’s metaphor, ultimately this work is about whose labor is recognized and whose is sectioned off as noise in the gendered and racialized networks of exchange that defined midcentury film production in the region.¹⁹ The institutions of the film press, and the films themselves, both stage dramas of noisiness in the way they process global trends. Sager’s films created a kind of feedback loop which highlighted aspects of his films’ music, choreography, disguise plots, moving camera, and canted angles as evidence of expertise gained through a connection to Bombay studios and schools. Taking these dramas as an object of analysis can offer, beyond the goal of resolving a career from the background static of cinema history, a step toward seeing golden ages in relational rather than static and siloed terms.

¹⁹These dynamics are explored in detail in Claire Cooley, *Sonic Infrastructures: The Emergence of National Cinemas in the Soundscape of al-Hind* (forthcoming; University of California Press).